

‘Stuck’ between ceasefires and peacebuilding: Finding positive responses to young men’s experiences of violence, and personal safety

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Introduction

Northern Ireland is a society emerging from a period of prolonged conflict commonly known as ‘the troubles.’ With a population of 1.74 million, there are few people whose lives have not been impacted by the conflict. It is estimated that approximately 88,000 families have lost a close relative (Haydon, 2009). During the troubles there were some 3,700 deaths. There were also 34,000 shootings, 35,000 injuries, 14,000 bombings, over 3,000 punishment shootings and over 2,500 punishment beatings by paramilitary organisations. Of those killed, 40% were 24 or under and 25% of all punishment attacks were on those under 19 year olds. Throughout ‘the troubles’, it was predominantly young men who were the primary victims and perpetrators of sectarian violence. 91% of deaths were male with 32% of deaths young males aged 17 -24 yrs (Muldoon, et al, 2008; Smyth and Hamilton, 2003).

A recent study carried out by the Centre for Young Men’s Studies reveals that the relationship between violence and personal safety continues to be critical to young men’s everyday lives. Despite the peace process, very little seems to have changed with regard to these young men’s experiences and attitudes towards violence, leaving them ‘stuck’ somewhere between paramilitary ceasefires and the rhetoric of peacebuilding. This paper is an attempt to hear issues through the voices of these young men who feel disconnected from their communities and alienated from the world of adults. The paper also indicates ways in which those who encounter and work with young men in their professional lives can better address the issues raised by young men in this study.

Method

Consultations and conversations were carried out with 130 young men aged 13-16 from more than 20 urban and rural communities throughout Northern Ireland. Seventy-five were Catholic and forty-five Protestant with ten foreign nationals. Group size varied from three to ten, but the average group size was six. Using a semi-structured interview schedule, a series of focus groups were organised where young men could talk openly about their communities, their lives and their experiences of violence. Knowing from previous experience that young men might be reluctant to talk about certain potentially controversial issues with adults they did not know, the Centre for Young Men's Studies worked alongside a number of experienced youth workers with boys and young men in the running of the focus groups. The research team consisted of three experienced researchers within the Centre for Young Men's Studies staff (including the authors of this article) and six youth workers.

We accessed young men in projects or areas with which the youth workers were familiar. The disproportionate numbers of Catholic and Protestant young men was a result of the selection of experienced youth workers who worked with boys and young men, rather than by design. The young men were from right across Northern Ireland - Ballymena, Ballymurphy, Bushmills, Carrickfergus, Cliftonville, Ardoyne, Clonard, Cullyhanna, Derry, Divis, Donegal Road, Glen Road, Limavady, Loughmore, Lower Falls, Monkstown, Newry, Poleglass, Rathcoole, Sandy Row, Springfield, Upper Anderstown, Upper Falls and Whitehead. The majority of participants in the study lived within areas with the highest levels of deprivation and poverty.

All of the conversations were taped, and the interviewers completed a pro forma highlighting the main issues they thought had emerged from the young men. We had lively interchanges between interviewer(s) and young men; we had some that were measured conversations and a few that were stilted as the young men were reluctant to engage and the interviewer found himself having to tease out young men's views.

The young men's views were shaped by their social, cultural, economic and political contexts from the communities within which they lived but two other factors emerged that were shown to influence how they thought and acted

- How much they were drawn by the 'buzz' of violence and
- How comfortable they felt on the street

While we were not aiming to reflect the views of all young men in Northern Ireland, or portray them as representative of these specific communities, these young men, nevertheless, do represent a significant group with significant experiences and offer us voices and a narrative not usually recorded.

What and how have we reported?

Our aim is to present what the young men told us without judging what they said. The young men reported, (some dramatically) different experiences of violence and personal safety. At one end were those young men who were generally frightened and looked to avoid conflict as much as they could, while at the other end were those that were drawn to violence and/or were actively involved in rioting, anti-social behaviour and criminal activity. By far the majority of those we spoke to placed themselves somewhere between these extremes, sometimes drawn by the 'buzz', but usually knowing when they should stop.

Findings

Violence

The emerging picture is one of

- a lack of trust towards young men from the 'other' community
- communities where paramilitaries were still active
- a fluctuating ambivalence about paramilitaries continuing role
- daily concern or experience of violence
- a changing demographic in communities
- an absence of will, incentive or appetite for change or contact with the 'other side'
- minimal experience of constructive interaction with adults in their communities or the police
- a lack of tangible benefit from or affiliation with the peace process

The common view amongst all these young men was that sectarian divisions were still strong between Catholics and Protestants. Their experience was one of having very little contact with the 'other' community that didn't involve actual or potential violence. While some suggested it wasn't quite as hate-filled as before, the majority described a ceasefire that left them feeling confused about whether their community was at peace or preparing for war or still at war. As one young man reported:

We were all brought up to hate Catholics and they're brought up to hate Protestants. Nothing will change until we have mixed schools. It's not those my age, it is my dad and his dad. It goes back too far and you don't believe there really is peace.

80% of young men indicated that while attitudes had changed a little, they were pessimistic about the peace process which they suggested had not filtered down to their local communities. As one young man reported:

Peace—what peace—things have not changed at all. We don't go near Catholic areas and they don't come near us. Nobody trusts each other.

A significant number of Catholic and Protestant young men (90%) reported that paramilitaries were still very active in their communities. Ongoing paramilitary activity and the potential of paramilitaries to inflict various forms of violence, particularly on young men, were perceived as a major threat to their enjoyment and activities. This caused them anxiety and made them feel unsafe in their own areas. Conversely, for 10 % of young men paramilitaries were seen as a positive force who kept their communities safe and who sorted out community problems. In the words of one young man:

No one protects the community now. Things have changed and now people think they can do what they like. You feel safer with the paramilitaries. You know they will protect you and keep law and order.

For the majority of young men, however, paramilitary members were just:

wee lads who think they are hard men who run the community.

For others, paramilitaries were important in order to

protect our community and keep law and order

The dichotomy between young men's differing perceptions of paramilitary organisations was a key feature of the consultations.

Seventy five percent of young men said that there were high levels of violence (or threats of violence) and anti-social behaviour within their communities. They believed that violence was on the increase, particularly in interface areas, during the weekends and at night. For example:

I don't go out of my area, I am afraid even in my own street. I stay in most nights. You have to make sure your mates are always with you. If I do go anywhere alone I get a taxi.

Whilst 25% of young men were very quick to describe regular violent incidents that they had witnessed, the majority of young men described incidents they had not witnessed, but had heard about within their communities. The perceived fear of violence was as real to them as actual violence. This was particularly evident when participants recalled events during the troubles citing local people who were lionised as 'heroes' in their communities. Despite their relatively young age, these young men spoke articulately about older men who had defended their communities and spent time in prison. Summer recreational violence¹ such as starting fights at bonfires and rioting during marching parades were mentioned as "*good craic*." Most of these young men stated that they became involved in summer community violence because they "*were bored*" or "*had nothing better to do*" or did not want sectarian bands marching through their areas.

For approximately 10% of those young men we talked to, conflict and violence was much more likely because of what they themselves did. This typically involved going into another community provoking or looking for trouble; robbing people or being in situations where violence was more likely. For them violence had an association of high status in their community. For example:

It makes you feel like you have power. It makes you feel good and you get a reputation. It's dangerous and you know that someone may get hurt but that's just part of it.

The vast majority however (90%), were more inclined to avoid the more dangerous forms of violence, but if, for instance, other young men came into their areas / estates they would resist these attacks and get a 'buzz' from this. These young men were more likely to describe a mixture of excitement and fear, knowing that they could get hurt, but getting a thrill from the fact that they didn't, or even if they did, that those they were fighting came off worse. As one young man stated:

¹ Recreational violence – a term used to describe behaviour (usually from young men) that is seen as a form of pleasure or a means to pass the time by those who engage in it. It is sporadic rioting, in the form of stone throwing or petrol bombs usually during controversial parades in Northern Ireland during the summer.

I like fighting. It gets the adrenaline going. Ya sometimes go looking for fights just for the excitement.

Most became animated as they reported or discussed incidents. For these young men, the 'buzz' was exciting and strong enough for them to want to be involved in violence, whether it came through fighting, rioting, drinking or using drugs.

Seventy five percent of the young men mentioned alcohol and drugs as contributing factors for violence in their areas. Young men becoming drunk and getting involved in fights and conflict were mentioned as common features. These young men said that they typically avoided pubs and street corners where there were drinkers in order to avoid violence. While a small minority (5%) suggested some drug use reduced the possibilities of violence (as a stress reducer), the majority of young men believed that dealing in drugs too often led to some of the most extreme forms of violence.

In some communities (especially some Protestant communities), young men reported an increase in race-related violence. They suggested that the recent arrival of immigrants replaced the 'other community' as the threat, but the term 'enemy' was still commonly used to describe the other side. Most young men mentioned foreign nationals in racist ways: "*They're taking our jobs and houses.*" These came over as learnt and clichéd phrases and the thing to say, rather than a result of actual experience or fact. Forty percent of young men made a direct link between their communities becoming more multi-cultural and an increase in violent incidents,

Our community has changed now because of immigrants coming in – there's more fighting now among locals than ever before.

Even if this is a perception and not a reality, race related violence would appear to be another barrier towards Northern Ireland becoming a multi-cultural society.

Very few young men knew people outside of their own community. Although there were occasional stories of chatting after fighting, seeing girls from across the divide, sometimes conversations tinged with tension in neutral areas, there were also some positive experiences (through school or cross community initiatives). It was a feature that these positive experiences were almost always initiated by others and not the young men themselves. These young men are unlikely to look for, or initiate, cross community contact or relationships. They articulate a sense of safety with segregation and a lack of an appetite for change or incentive or motivation to make things different.

Ninety percent of young men also highlighted changes in the way members of their community react to them as they have grown older. Reports of aggressive and negative responses toward them were common. From the age of thirteen these young men increasingly felt distanced from community life. They spoke of having no meaningful relationships with older adults and spoke of constantly being targeted and harassed by paramilitaries and the police. Fifty percent of young men suggested that there were many more violent incidents than were reported to the police, suggesting that statistics on violent crimes were much lower than in reality.

Personal safety

The emerging picture was that of

- safety in numbers when travelling in and out of their communities
- a negative view of police
- school was one of the places where young men felt the most safe
- for many the carrying of weapons is something that you may need to consider for personal safety
- mobile phones and the internet are used as a part of their personal safety strategies

Geographical areas defined territory where the young men felt safe and where they believed they could and could not go. This appears to be the same whether the area is urban or rural. If young men were considering going out of their immediate area, they would make an assessment of risk which would usually mean they would travel in groups and at calculated times. Almost everyone described high levels of inter-dependency on mates to enable them to have a social life and feel safer.

Town or city centres were seen by many as 'neutral' areas, but these places still had to be approached with caution. Young men were very aware of 'rules' about travelling outside of their own communities and appeared to observe these rules rigorously:

You always take a mate with you and keep your mobile phone charged.

You let yer mates know where you are so they can come quickly if you need help.

You stay away from places where gangs hang around.

Almost all of the young men reported that they did not trust the police to protect them. The police were described as a threat to, rather than protectors of, personal safety. There was only one area where young men reported that the police patrolled regularly and as a result their community was safer. For the vast majority however, the police tended to be seen as more of the problem than solution. This was particularly true for young men who were more likely to hang around street corners in groups. They stated that the police 'harassed' them and made them 'move on.' As quoted by one young man,

There is a lot that goes on that the police do not know about, loads of fights and the police aren't called. The police fly around in our street every now and again, but that's all.

Young men often said that as they had grown older, they were persistently seen as a threat by the police. While these young men presented a picture of perpetually being perceived negatively by most people, they felt the police took this further. A small number of young men said that it was police attitudes that led to them going out of their own areas or into the woods or waste ground where they could just '*hang out with their mates*'. This poor attitude to, and poor relationship with the police drove them to find safe, out of the way places in their communities that lessened the potential of contact with them

Whilst 20% of participants said they felt safe within their own communities, the majority (80%) said they did not. For these young men, techniques were important as ways of avoiding potentially violent situations, whether this involved staying indoors, going to safe and organised activities, not spending time on the street at more dangerous times, or going out of their communities to safer areas. For those young men who said they felt safe in their communities, their safety was conditional on who they knew and who knew them. In the words of one young man:

No one protects the community now. You felt safer with the paramilitaries. Police have put community safety wardens in our area, but they won't even come into the area because they don't even feel safe.

Participants reported that while school could be a threatening place they felt safer there than in their communities. This was primarily due to the fact that there was discipline and clear boundaries. It was the travelling to and from school, rather than in school itself, that held the most potential as a threat to personal safety.

Many of the young men said that weapons (knives, bats and screwdrivers) were often carried on their estates and occasionally used. Protection and safety were cited as the reasons for this,

Every day there is a crime. Not just where we live, it's everywhere. You have to know how to protect yourself.

A smaller number of the young men (10%) openly said that they would/do carry a weapon. Attitudes varied with some thinking that only those who couldn't fight would carry a weapon (being less of a man), while others thought those that were more dangerous were more likely to use a weapon.

Mobile phones were mentioned as part of young men's personal safety. Phones were used as backup as well as a threat to challenge other young men to a fight. MSN and Bebo were mentioned as ways of organising fights and threatening others, while YouTube was used to post footage of past fights and conflicts.

Looking towards a response to the needs of marginalised young men.

For the vast majority of these young men youth centres were not for them, or else they perceived them as "*rubbish*". Over half the young men wanted more sport-related activities and facilities in their communities. Eight per cent thought that schools should provide more activities after the academic day. For these young men, the request was for 'safe' and 'exciting' activities and opportunities. They were not averse to these activities being run by adults, but they felt that they should be allowed enough freedom to enjoy themselves. It is significant that adults received criticism for their lack of understanding of young men in communities but also were recognised as essential to the running and organising of activities

The majority of participants (95%) responded positively (not resisting but welcoming) when asked if they would be interested in learning skills in dealing with violence and conflict. Given most young men's general pessimism about change, this suggested that young men's pessimism was more about their inability to see what could change. A smaller number of young men (5%) responded to this suggestion with reluctance because they saw this as taking away from the 'buzz' which they were drawn towards as perpetrators of violence.

Whilst all were pessimistic about the potential impact of cross community activities, ten young men spoke of cross community initiatives they had been

involved in that they considered beneficial. Critical elements included initiatives during primary school (before suspicions and threats had become significant barriers), where guest speakers who had credibility within their community (usually meant someone with a paramilitary background, had done time, and/or possibly killed people), had made a significant impact on them. Also important was a focus on joint activities rather than simply talking to the other side (i.e. activity based). For example:

We did something, where there was a top UVF person and one from IRA, that had changed, both had done time, the UVF man said he had started when he was 11. He told us everything, he had done drugs, had a daughter, went to prison and then he changed.

Getting away from the area is a good thing, once a month, not going to France, but out walking, archery, cross community. You get to know them when you are doing things, not just sitting in a room listening to leaders. You are just sitting there eyeballing the others, if you are doing archery or something, you are focussed on that.

For another young man it was important to have safety and trust:

We want places in our own area which are safe and have things to do, with adults you can trust and you know. We don't have a park or leisure centre in our area.

Their formula for change was described as hearing directly from paramilitaries, learning from their experiences and being involved in activities that took you out of your own community which could involve young people from the 'other side'. Ideally there should be things to do in their communities that involved action and activity. For these young men, this offered a prospect of change.

Towards solutions

Working with Young Men

What we have is a snapshot of the views of a particular group of young men at a given point in time. The data has been gathered by experienced youth workers and academics who have experience of working with young men who get stereotyped as marginalised. A number of issues are raised that have implications and challenges for those working with boys and young men.

It is apparent that no one agency or service can claim to meet all the needs of marginalised young men in any society. The key message is to develop a multi-agency approach and partnerships that will be much more effective in delivering preventative strategies to address violence and violence-related issues with marginalized young men. Some good examples of multi-agency approaches to working with marginalized young men in Northern Ireland already exist. A sector that is particularly strong in this area is Youth Justice. Good practice examples exist around Restorative Justice Practice through the PSNI, Youth Services, Youth Justice Agencies with the active involvement of local voluntary and community groups. These have shown to have been effective in tackling issues of youth crime and anti social behaviour. But more needs to be done to find more creative ways to engage marginalized young males. The multi agency/disciplinary approach is well documented and trailed over the years but remains a challenge, particularly with increasingly limited resources and harsh reductions in public sector spending forecast for the years to come.

An additional factor is that young men display a general reluctance to seek support or access existing formal support services and are distrusting towards people they do not know. This makes it difficult to promote cross community initiatives. Furthermore 'most young people grow up in single identity communities and are educated in either Catholic or Protestant schools and socialised according to their religion' (McAlister, Scraton and Haydon, 2009:92). These are two significant barriers that provide another challenging backdrop to working positively with marginalised young men.

It is our assertion and belief that creating environments where young men can think, reflect, talk openly and honestly, explore values and consider other viewpoints is crucial. These should be environments where young men can experience feeling valued and safe from threat and judgemental attitudes. The required skill for workers is to actively listen to young men combined with an appreciation of the issues that are important to them (Harland, 1997). Equally important is an attitude that respects young men as active agents of change in contrast to the negative and stereotypical images of young men that are so often presented in the media.

Harland (2002) found in work with young men around the theme of violence that through increased self-reflection and learning appropriate skills, practitioners were more effective at engaging young men and experienced increased empathy in regard to young men's issues. Harland and McCready (2007) further found that the following factors have been fundamental to successful work with young men:

- A proactive approach that focused on developing young men's self-confidence
- An appreciation of masculinity and how this impacted upon male behaviour
- Identification of issues affecting young men and using creative ways to address these
- Establishing appropriate learning environments in which young men felt safe and valued
- Offering young men the chance to combine reflection with activity
- The practitioner's skills, knowledge and commitment to building meaningful relationships with young men
- Appreciation and display of the qualities that young men look for in a practitioner – trust, genuineness, respect, humour, support and acceptance

Proposals to Encourage Young Men's active participation in their communities and contributing to the peace process

The following proposals aim to help focus discussion and debate about violence and personal safety in a way that more directly involves marginalised young men in locally based initiatives and peacebuilding processes. This is particularly important as so many young men feel disconnected from their communities and exist without the support or influence of older adults.

1. Conflict resolution programmes within formal education, Youth Justice and Youth Services that help young men deal more practically with potential violent situations. These should involve information as well as a strong skills learning focus. They need to be a mixture of physical activity and talk-based sessions that increase young men's confidence in dealing with conflict and violent situations as well as enhancing their ability to assess dangers. This initiative would aim to increase young men's confidence and ability to avoid violent situations and enable them to recognise when the dangers are real rather than perceived.

2. The extended schools programme has more potential than is currently being experienced by these young men in their communities. Schools (both primary and secondary) could be even more active in after school and evening activities that build upon the safety currently experienced by young men within their schools. Opportunities exist for much closer partnership working between Schools and the Youth Service (voluntary and statutory) in providing safe, high quality, age specific and varied initiatives. In the short term, services targeted at young men as described above could be built into the school day.

There is a need to look at existing resources such as schools within communities to ensure they are responding appropriately in both programmes and times of opening to the needs of the community they are there to serve. Schools and the Youth Service working together could be offering evening activities to ensure that young men have alternatives to the street and its potential dangers. The combination of the young men's perceptions of the school environment as a safe place and the skills that youth workers have in engaging marginalised young men has enormous untapped potential.

3. Community safety initiatives should include young men in their composition and formation in order to look at common interests and critical roles that need to be played by them in their communities. Community-led safety initiatives that actively involve young men are more likely to achieve their aims. Although young men are prominent in crime and anti social behaviour as victims and perpetrators, surprisingly they are often not part of any community safety initiatives. Consulting with and involving young men could make a valuable contribution to and enhance community safety programmes.

4. There needs to be a re-examination of cross-community programmes that have a tendency to concentrate on people's perceptions of each other. The young men in this study talked about dangerous places as much as dangerous people. This suggests there is a need to explore how to make particular areas safer for young men (and others). Such programmes could adopt more conflict based strategies (such as truces, mediation and negotiating territories) in order to make places safe for people. The rationale for this is that conflict and safety are so strongly interwoven with geography and territory that any strategy will have to focus on places as well as people.

5. Selected communities, where levels of safety are particularly low (interface and others), should become the focus of activity. For example, sport and talk-based youth work strategies that meet the needs of a broad range of young people, but particularly young men, could be employed. Too often young men said their own communities were unsafe for them, which suggests a level of social exclusion that is unacceptable. Additionally, the majority of young men feared the perceived dangers of going into other communities. This initiative would aim to connect young men to specific youth orientated provision within their own communities. Part of this strategy could be aimed at a particular group who are dominant in the local area and whose their presence stops others from access.

6. Programmes should be developed that target recently arrived young men to ensure that they have the skills, language and understanding to live in Northern Ireland safely. Findings suggest that the more immigrant young men understand the language (formal and street), have well developed conflict resolution skills and understanding of the host culture, the quicker they settle and the safer they feel.

7. Initiatives targeting parents of boys (under 5) that address the concerns of parents about the safety of their sons have the potential for positive change. Parents respond in different ways to the dangers they see facing their sons in communities. Some are over-protective (try to keep their sons indoors) whilst others can be under-protective (allow them to be in the community unsupervised or within unsafe environments). Within the consultations young men often talked about when they were younger and at what age they were outside playing with others, often unsupervised by adults, and how the younger ones they see now get involved in throwing bricks and lighting fires. Parents are often concerned about their sons, both in terms of difficulties they might find themselves in and their futures. Support groups for parents should aim to increase parents' confidence in supporting their sons and understanding their development.

8. The Northern Ireland calendar throws up regular dates and times that have led in the past to points of conflict and tension in many communities. There is a need for youth orientated initiatives that target young men coming up to and around these times. This is most needed during summer months when sectarian violence is more likely to occur due to controversial marching parades. These violence awareness programmes would offer young men an alternative to recreational violence through combining activity based interventions and conflict resolution skills development.

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